



Autumn of Our Discontent: Fall 1949 and the Crises in American National Security by John M. Curatola.

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This new book by military historian and Marine Corps veteran John Curatola (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies) examines the evolution of US military and nuclear policies in the second half of 1949, leading up to the creation of National Security Council Paper NSC-68. The book concentrates on two external factors—the Soviets’ successful atomic bomb test and the communist victory in China—and two internal factors—the struggle between the Air Force and Navy over budget and mission, and the debate over building a hydrogen bomb. Curatola draws on military, diplomatic, and political histories of the inner workings of Pres. Harry Truman’s administration to produce a fully researched and instructive narrative. Especially welcome is his scrutiny of both the internal struggles over money in the newly minted Department of Defense and the American people’s reaction to the almost simultaneous loss of their nation’s atomic monopoly and the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

Curatola structures the book into three parts: Summer, Autumn, and Winter. There are four overarching themes that he discusses across those three chronologically-based book sections. He shifts within these sections from the perspective of civilian leaders in the Truman administration to that of military rivals and then external forces. The narrative sets up discussions of interservice rivalries (esp., Navy vs. Air Force), the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb, the collapse of Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist regime in China, and the decision to develop the “super” (i.e., hydrogen bomb).

The author details the Navy’s struggle to thwart the Air Force’s attempt to limit the Navy’s strategic airpower as it played out from the National Security Act of 1947 to the beginning of 1950. This theme is the best developed of Curatola’s four, with significant insight into the impact of changing leadership in the Defense Department, which resulted in an expanded mission and budget for the Air Force. In response, the Navy publicly attacked the Air Force’s budgetary process and efficacy. This backfired badly.

The second theme—the Soviets’ development of the bomb—is a withering critique of the Americans’ ill-preparedness for such an eventuality. Curatola explains just what the Soviets’ espionage contributed (or not) to their ultimate success. He also details how paltry the American arsenal was and how unaware US military leaders were of that fact. Indeed, the military had developed an extensive atomic bombing campaign plan that both exceeded the number of existing bombs and outstripped US current capacity to construct more. The unexpected success of the Soviets forced the Americans to improve coordination, production, and preparation of its atomic deterrent.

The third theme—communist Chinese victory and its political ramifications—is a standard narrative regarding the corrupt and incompetent Nationalist leadership. Curatola points out that the communists overcame initial deficits across the board in manpower, weaponry, and international political recognition, thanks largely to their enemies’ poor performance. He also surveys the

many failed attempts of the Truman administration to negotiate an end to the fighting and the political problems that arose in the process. The author summarizes the nature of the China Lobby and the part the “loss” of China played in domestic politics for the rest of the administration. This retelling of a familiar tale breaks no new ground, but is crucial to Curatola’s overall argument.

The final theme concerns the development of the hydrogen bomb. It effectively integrates research into both the internal debates over the issue and the external factors that drove the decision to proceed with the project. Curatola compellingly describes the initial strong opposition to developing the H-Bomb within the Atomic Energy Commission and among Truman’s scientific advisors. Significant moral reservations shifted as the communists’ successes brought increasing pressure to bear on the administration and the country. By 1950, Truman and most of his civilian and military advisors saw no choice but to move forward, especially since, they assumed, the Soviets had already done so.

With the passing season, a new reality emerged. The United States would embark on something wholly different in the American experience, laying the framework for a significantly larger military force, including both conventional and nuclear weapons, as part of a permanent overseas presence.... While events would still unfold in the upcoming winter of 1949–50, the stage was already set for the introduction of wholesale changes. With coming events like the Korean War to spur the implementation of these changes, the seeds for NSC 68 and its wide-ranging effects had already germinated. (198)

Curatola is best on the military struggles and the nuclear weapons programs. His treatment of political and foreign policy matters is more derivative. A few minor errors include calling Richard Nixon the *Chair* (he was a freshman member) of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He sometimes loses track of his own chronology. For instance, he gets the dates wrong for Alger Hiss’s appearances before HUAC (217).

Cavils aside, John Curatola well achieves his goal of clarifying how and why events in 1949 altered the course of American military policies. The Soviet atomic bomb and the establishment of the PRC led the Truman administration to commit the United States to developing a hydrogen bomb, quadrupling the defense budget in 1950, and committing the United States to maintaining by far the most varied and powerful military force ever since.

Autumn of Our Discontent is a clearly written, solidly researched study of a key turning point in American military and political history; it will appeal to and enlighten college students and interested lay readers alike.